

RUUMC 12-13-2020
Hosea 3:1-5
The Gift of Joy-Scandalous Love

Many years ago, I was a Hospice Chaplain in the San Gabriel Valley. The patients I saw had been diagnosed with a life-limiting condition and were recommended to Hospice Care by their doctor. Hospice is usually for those patients who have a prognosis of six months or less should their disease run its normal course. I felt honored and privileged to minister to hospice patients and their loved ones during their sacred journey at the end of life. It was a very meaningful ministry.

One day, I received a phone call from the spouse of a patient. Before answering the phone, I held my breath for a moment. I was anxious about talking to this man because I was not sure what I would hear. His wife of 25 years lived in a facility where she received excellent 24-hour care and had been on hospice for six months. In all that time, her husband had never visited her. The patient told us her husband was a successful man, making millions of dollars each year, often traveling overseas for business. He provided her with all the luxuries she could ever want, and she called him an “awfully nice husband.” In my conversations with her, their marriage sounded like it was happy and perfect. Financially and socially, they were privileged people. Still, something about their relationship felt strange. For one thing, I was perplexed by his complete absence during the final stage of her life. Since my job was to care for both the patient and her family, I periodically left messages on his phone. For months, I heard nothing from him, which made no sense to me. Hence my anxiety when he finally did call.

I took a deep breath and picked up the phone. He was returning my phone message from a week earlier when I called to let him know about a significant change in his wife’s health. She was no longer able to swallow clear liquids, which was a sign that the natural dying process had begun. She was one step closer to death. During my conversation with the husband, I asked if he would be able to visit her soon since her health was declining. After a long pause, he told me that he had never loved her. I

have to admit I was shocked. So I asked him, **“You have never loved your wife of 25 years?”** After another long pause, he shared his story with me. For the entire 25 years of their marriage, this man had been involved with someone else. He was unfaithful to his wife the whole time they were married and believed his wife had no idea. Since he had never loved his wife, he saw no reason to visit her, even though she was dying alone, even when she needed him the most. Sadly, he never changed his mind. She died without seeing him again. The rest of the medical team and I were heartbroken by his decision and that she died without family or friends around her. As I traveled that last road with her, my feelings were in a tangle. I was sad and angry and even in despair.

My experience with this couple showed me just how shallow and inauthentic our relationships can be--even the most important ones. My patient's husband made solemn promises to his wife before God and the congregation. You know the vows couples take: “to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death.”¹ Marriage is a sacred covenantal relationship two people enter before God when they make vows to be loyal and faithful to one another. It is also a reflection of Christian baptism. When we are baptized, we vow before God and the congregation to be in a covenantal relationship with God. At both weddings and baptisms, we publicly commit to enter into a covenantal union. We promise to be loyal and faithful to the love we have received from God and from our beloved.

From a Christian perspective, the text from Hosea portrays one of the most bizarre marital relationships found in the Bible. In it, God instructed the prophet Hosea to marry an adulteress named Gomer even though Hosea knew she would continue her adultery. That's pretty wild, isn't it? Why would he marry someone he knew would betray him? And why would God tell him to do that? Gomer did exactly what Hosea knew she would-- she left Hosea and had a relationship with someone else. What made it

¹ Susan Morrison et al., *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashville, Tennessee: United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 120.

worse was that Hosea knew he was probably not the father of their 3 children. I know such betrayals happen, and I hope no one here has experienced it. Can you imagine?

What is perhaps even more bizarre than the marriage is the reason for it. Hosea's marital relationship with Gomer was used as an analogy of the relationship between the Lord and Israel. You remember God's covenant with Abraham. You remember that God led the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt into the Promised Land. You remember that the children of Israel asked for a king like the other nations had, and that some kings were faithful to Israel's covenant with God -- and some weren't. Jeroboam II was one of the faithful ones. His reign provided a century of political stability and economic prosperity. After his death, Israel went through a period of national crisis and floundered under the subsequent rule of Assyria.² During this dark era of Israel's history, the Israelites allied themselves with other nations and drifted away from their religious practices and, ultimately, from their covenantal relationship with God. Eventually, they broke their covenant with God to be in a fully committed relationship.

Like the Israelites, we are also in a covenantal relationship with God. How well are we holding up our part of the covenant? In this season of Advent, how is our relationship with God? Have we been faithful to God in 2020? Is God always our priority? By any chance, have there been moments when we have loved other things more than we loved God? If so, what sorts of things? Money? Shopping? Success? Title? Reputation? Promotion? Getting our own way? Being right over being loving? I know such questions are difficult, and our answers may make us uncomfortable. But Advent calls us to take time to examine our hearts deeply and prayerfully in our search for true answers.

Hosea's relationship with Gomer did not end with her infidelity. After a time of separation, Hosea brought his wife back and forgave her. Even though she was unfaithful as Hosea knew she would be, he remained

² Michael D. Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1258.

faithful to her. The analogy of Hosea's marriage to our relationship with God is a bit obvious in this part of the story. Even when we are unfaithful and do not love God best, God's love for us never fails. God's faithfulness to us never ends.

Friends, if we are truly honest with ourselves, we know there are moments when we love other things more than we love God. There are times when we desire something else more than we desire God. As Mike Slaughter states, "we remain under the influence of unworthy lovers such as greed, selfishness, addiction, and deceit."³ Hosea's bizarre and even scandalous love for his unfaithful wife shows us the true meaning of Advent and Christmas: God responded to our pain and our unfaithfulness by becoming a human being. God became one of us to renew our relationship with God in spite of our faithlessness. Like the Israelites, there are times when we, too, drift away from God. There are times we go astray. However, despite our unfaithfulness, Advent reminds us that God comes to us, that God craves a loving relationship with us. Like Hosea, God is always faithful, even knowing that we will not always be. This is God's scandalous love, the gift of Christmas.

This gift is God's grace – freely given to all despite our failures, our brokenness, our imperfection. We may leave God. We may love the unworthy more than we love God. We may even doubt God's love and grace. But the good news is that nothing we ever do or leave undone will ever be able to separate us from God's love. Nothing we ever do or leave undone will ever change God's heart for us. This Advent, as we await the arrival of the Prince of Peace once again at Christmas, let us return to God wholeheartedly. Let us share this love with our friends, our family, and our neighbors, especially those most in need of the hope of the Gospel.

May your Advent journey be a blessing to all you encounter. Amen.

³ Mike Slaughter, *Christmas Is Not Your Birthday: Experience the Joy of Living and Giving Like Jesus* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2011), 45.